

Los Angeles Times

City of Los Angeles to certify green businesses

The program to urge environmentally friendly practices hopes to launch in six months.

By Cyndia Zwahlen

December 8, 2008

Dumpster diving isn't in her job description but Leslie VanKeuren, general manager of the popular Silver Lake restaurant Gingergrass, isn't above climbing into the eatery's special compostable-food waste bin to retrieve a carelessly tossed Styrofoam container or other stray item.

She's determined to make the 4-year-old restaurant as environmentally responsible as possible, and that includes ensuring noncompliant material doesn't gum up the works at the composting facility where the bags of food scraps are headed.

"It helps to be dedicated, most definitely," VanKeuren said.

Gingergrass and other restaurants are considered a prime target for adopting the sustainable practices that will be part of Los Angeles' new green-business certification program, for which funding was announced last week.

Los Angeles City Councilman Richard Alarcon, who has been working to get the program off the ground for several years, invited VanKeuren and two other green-practicing businesses to the public launch of the project.

"Hopefully, we'll inspire more businesses to be environmentally friendly, not just because it's good for business but because it's the right thing to do," said Alarcon, whose 7th District includes Pacoima, Sylmar and other areas. The former state senator introduced legislation for a statewide plan in 2004, but it didn't pass.

L.A.'s program, which Alarcon's office hopes will be certifying businesses within six months, would focus initially on restaurants, retailers, office-based businesses, auto repair shops and hotels. The \$150,000 grant from the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power will allow the city's Environmental Affairs Department to issue a request for proposals from organizations or companies that want to operate the program for the city.

A likely contender is Sustainable Works, a nonprofit that operates Santa Monica's green business certification program. So is the Los Angeles Community College District, which Alarcon said was establishing a training course to teach businesses how to be green.

The certification program, which he said should cost a small business less than \$500 to participate in, would be meant to give a marketing edge to individual businesses, as well as the city itself.

"Angelenos are very progressive when it comes to environmental matters, and this has the potential for really galvanizing civic pride about Los Angeles and the good things we are doing," said Jonathan Parfrey, director of the Green L.A. Coalition, which is working with the city to design and implement the certification program.

The program already has received the backing of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce.

The city's convention and visitors group, L.A. Inc., which is working with third-party certifier Green Seal to help lodging businesses earn its green stamp, is coordinating with the city program to match up certification criteria.

Los Angeles has posted its proposed criteria for businesses that want to earn its green stamp at www.environmentla.org. One of the proposed criteria is that restaurants would need to recycle cardboard, paper, glass, metal and plastics but could choose whether to collect food waste for off-site composting.

They would be required to replace older "T-12" fluorescent lighting as part of choosing seven ways to save energy from the online checklist. They'd have to operate dishwashers only when full, soak pots and pans instead of cleaning them with running water and serve guests drinking water only when requested. The list, which also includes a requirement to educate other businesses, goes on and on -- but doesn't daunt VanKeuren of Gingergrass.

In the last 13 months, spurred by lessons learned on the green committee of the Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce, VanKeuren has gradually put in place environmentally friendly practices at the 45-employee restaurant.

Styrofoam to-go containers have been largely replaced with biodegradable alternatives. Most of the cleaning products have been replaced with Green Seal approved items. Incandescent light bulbs have been replaced with newer fluorescent lighting. And employees are encouraged to bring their own mugs, which are cleaned for them each shift, rather than using disposable cups and lids for beverages.

Customers and employees have appreciated the changes, she said.

"It's definitely helped increase business and it's improved morale," VanKeuren said.

Costs have been modest, she said, noting that the restaurant charges a 3% surcharge on to-go orders to cover the higher cost of the biodegradable containers. "Thankfully, the Silver Lake community has been very receptive to this," she said.

The biggest change for the business, which plans to open a Burbank location next year, has been participating in the city's food waste composting program. VanKeuren said the cost of the service is subsidized for the first three years, including 50% in the first year.

L.A.'s new certification program is modeled on a Bay Area program started by several Northern California counties in 1997. That program has certified about 800 businesses. San Diego also has a green certification.

Los Angeles, with its huge number of businesses, including 11,000 restaurants, would be attempting green certification on a larger scale than ever before. That has raised concerns about potential backlogs and whether the program would be able to serve all the city's communities equally.

Alarcon acknowledged the concerns but said he hoped to expand the program slowly to make sure it was manageable. Alarcon emphasized that the certification program would be flexible enough to give a small business a variety of ways to reduce waste and water and energy use to earn the green certification that is expected to attract customers.

"We believe if you have those kinds of strict guidelines, it will be a turnoff to businesses," he said. "The goal is to reduce the carbon footprint, not to get a business 100% perfect."